

History of Kyoto University

Kyoto University was established in 1897 as Japan's second imperial university. It is located in the historic city of Kyoto, which flourished as the nation's capital for over a thousand years until that status was transferred to Tokyo in the wake of the Meiji Restoration. Even after the relocation of the capital, Kyoto continued to be a hub of culture and technology. Japan's first elementary school and girls' school were opened there, and it was the location of the country's first commercial hydroelectric plant and first streetcars. It was within that milieu of cultural, technological, and industrial advancement that Kyoto University was established.

During its early period, Kyoto University developed various new approaches to education and research, including small-group seminars that emphasize interaction between students and instructors, incorporating thesis submission as a graduation requirement, and providing students with increased freedom in selecting their study subjects as a way to enhance motivation and encourage creativity. These innovative approaches pioneered by the university were eventually adopted as standard practices in Japanese higher education.

It was also in the early phase of its development that Kyoto University firmly grasped the importance of university autonomy. Academic freedom is essential to the scholarly quest for the truth—a goal common to all universities—and university autonomy is essential in ensuring academic freedom. Kyoto University was the first university in Japan to implement a structure whereby its faculty were free from external interference.

Through its pioneering approach to education and research, Kyoto University has cultivated some of Japan's finest minds and made significant contributions to the advancement of scholarship and science. Numerous winners of major international awards are affiliated with the university, such as renowned physicist Hideki Yukawa, Japan's first Nobel laureate. To this day, the university is known throughout Japan and around the world for its unique culture of academic freedom, and for being at the vanguard of cutting-edge research.



The view through the main gates (circa 1900)



The university library in the Meiji period (circa 1909)



Students in front of the university clock tower (circa 1928)